

6 housing trends for 2020; Kid-friendly condos, greener buildings will be big this year

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Body

Downtown Toronto is one big backyard for Nathan Dautovich's two daughters, aged five and one.

The library's a block away, Ripley's Aquarium - where they have a membership - is within splashing distance and one day, they did a "playground crawl" of six sites.

"It's worked out really well," Dautovich, 37, said of their two-bedroom-plus-den condo, where they've lived since 2014. "Convenience is the main thing."

In a city with soaring lowrise house prices, highrise condominiums are increasingly popular with families, according to Walter Melanson, co-founder of PropertyGuys.com.

It's one of the changes Melanson, lead analyst for the private-sale marketing company, has observed in the shifting landscape of the real estate and housing industries.

Here's a look at how some housing trends that are expected to grow in 2020:

Kids in condos: "Now it's a necessity," Dautovich said of raising children in condos.

A typical semi-detached house comparable in size to his spacious 1,300-square-foot unit would have been "significantly more expensive," explained the young dad, a Property Guys franchise owner.

One couple he knows is planning to fit their yet-unborn third child into a two-bedroom condo, while another has turned a bathroom into a nursery.

His neighbourhood lacks for nothing, Dautovich said. Daycare is next door, a new public school just opened across the road and other amenities are a short walk away.

And their community is populated by "our peers with similar interests," he said.

"Living in condos will become the norm rather than the exception," predicts the Daniels Corporation's Dominic Tompa. "It's the reality of a big city."

Every condo development Daniels builds now includes three-bedroom units, said Tompa, vice-president of sales.

It also designs buildings with youngsters in mind, incorporating on-site indoor and outdoor amenities, such as kid zones and recreational spaces where parents can supervise and socialize at the same time.

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Going greener: After a 20-year obsession with "making better buildings for people and the planet," Chris Magwood sees hope for the housing industry. Builders, developers and municipalities are showing interest in sustainable building practices, which the executive director of the Peterborough-based Endeavour Centre calls "a pretty big change."

Magwood and his non-profit building school are leading a new project, Builders for Climate Action, whose 2019 white paper outlines how carbon footprints can be reduced in lowrise building construction.

"Some steps are so easy," he said, and can be applied to home renovation projects.

According to Magwood, a carbon-storing, energy-efficient lowrise building can be constructed using less concrete; and with plant-based materials such as straw bales, bamboo and sustainable timber; cellulose insulation instead of mineral wool or foam products; and wood fibre board in place of foam board exterior insulation.

The Daniels Corporation is one GTA developer that's grabbing the climate-crisis bull by the horns.

"It's part of our DNA," said Adam Molson, director of project implementation. This year, Daniels will build 24 zero-emission urban townhomes in Regent Park, where the all-electric, fossil fuel-free homes will allow "carbon-free living," he said.

The townhomes will be more airtight, better insulated and outfitted with a drain water heat recovery system, as well as rooftop solar panels. Molson said they'll be six times more efficient than electric, baseboard-heat systems

"It's the furthest we've gone" to net zero energy, he said of the project.

The reno route: High prices are spurring some homeowners to rethink plans to buy a bigger home, Melanson has observed. Instead, they're deciding "to stay put in their starter home" and renovate.

Industry research bears that out. Millennials have become the renovation generation, a survey last year by home renovation website HomeStars found. More than half of the 23- to 38-year-old homeowners polled said they were considering a redo and 77 per cent of all respondents confirmed they had the cash for home improvements.

A poll by CIBC last year found that two-thirds of Canadian homeowners prefer to renovate rather than sell and move elsewhere.

Sharing the same roof: The "harsh reality of unaffordable rents in Toronto" hit Arnab Dastidar and Gaurav Madani last spring, after they graduated with MBAs from the Schulich School of Business.

As recent immigrants from India launching new careers and lacking credit history, they also faced rejection from landlords, Dastidar said. So they founded SoulRooms to meet the "huge demand" for housing by solo renters who find downtown living too expensive.

The co-living startup rents out 100 move-in ready rooms in furnished townhouses and condos in four downtown neighbourhoods, with plans to add 1,900 more this year.

Rates range from \$1,250 to \$1,850 a month for three sizes of rooms with a shared kitchen and living room.

SoulRooms and similar startups like Roost and Sociable Living are a new twist on the old concept of recruiting roommates to split the rent.

Its tenants include working professionals, new immigrants and international students. They are, on average, 28 years old and each signs a six-month lease, Dastidar said. Up to four renters per housing unit are matched based on lifestyle, preferences and interests.

"They made my transition from a student living in Mississauga to a new working professional working for a bank downtown absolutely seamless," tenant Saad Jabrani said in a Facebook review.

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New-breed realtors: "I'm not your typical real estate agent," said Lesli Gaynor, a Toronto business and community leader for 20 years with a background in social work.

Recognizing that people are priced out of the market and "starved" for community, she started GoCo Solutions. It guides unrelated purchasers toward buying a house together by pooling their resources.

The co-ownership movement is driven by three factors, explained Gaynor, an agent with Forest Hill Real Estate's downtown brokerage: financial struggles, "epidemic" isolation or loneliness and a disintegrating social fabric. Sharing a residence can bring support, as well as built-in child and seniors' care, she added.

As a new breed of realtor, she's part of a team with clients who are "far more knowledgeable," thanks to virtual tours and data on the internet and social media, she said, adding purchases and sales still require an agent's skills.

From Walter Melanson's perspective, technology has helped grow PropertyGuys.com, billed as the largest private home-sale network in North America.

Franchise owners are a "modern-day alternative" to "old-school" agents, offering expert advice to sellers who pay a fee for services, he said.

Rising prices: The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. has forecast a five per cent jump in Toronto-region home prices this year, putting the average at \$765,300 to \$898,400.

By the end of 2021, prices could average as much as \$949,400, a 10.5 per cent increase over 2019, the national housing agency said.

As real estate prices crush home-ownership dreams, rental demand is set to go "way up," RBC Economics predicted in last fall's "big city rental blues" report.

Meanwhile, the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$2,300, up from \$1,620 three years ago, according to PadMapper's long-running rent report in December 2019.

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